

Five ways your church might already welcome autistic adults

## And some ideas for expanding that welcome

by [Victoria Wick](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



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My first year serving as a full-time pastor was also the year I was diagnosed with autism. I was 28. Pandemic burnout sent me on a search for mental health support—a search that ultimately led to the discovery that I’m neurodivergent, a nonmedical umbrella term that encompasses those whose brains work differently than most. Autism is one form of neurodivergence.

I was surprised that someone could be an autist their whole life and not even realize it. I’ve since learned that there’s a good reason for that: most of the existing research on autism was conducted with preschool-age boys, but autism in girls—not to mention adult women—looks very different. Neurodivergent girls often face more pressure than their male peers to socially conform throughout their development. Many autistic girls learn to mask autistic traits so well that even we don’t realize we’re navigating more challenges than our non-autist peers.

But once I learned I was autistic, I made more sense to myself—my love of ritual and routine, my special interest in words, my near-constant analysis of social dynamics and meaning, my unassailable trust that other people have honest intentions. My call to ministry made more sense too.

A lot of autistic adults really like church, and not just because of widely held stereotypes about autism and rigid beliefs. Every autistic person is different, but because autistic brains have more neural connections than the average human brain, many autistic people are drawn to explore nuance and complexity. When a congregation succeeds in fostering theological curiosity and encouraging a variety of perspectives, it assures me that *my* differences might be welcomed and celebrated, too.

As Christians, it can be daunting to know that the work of inclusion and accessibility is never truly finished. That said, there may be ways that your congregation already accommodates autistic adults without even realizing it. Here are five things your church may already be doing that help autistic adults feel more comfortable and able to participate, along with suggestions for how you might expand your accommodations.

**You provide lots of structured activities.** Autistic people can find unfamiliar settings and unstructured time overwhelming, especially when forming connections with new people. Autists also generally struggle to interpret social cues, which can make navigating large social gatherings (or fellowship hours) challenging even after we've integrated into a community. But with Sunday school, prayer groups, committees, and mission teams, churches usually have many opportunities for people to get to know one another in more structured settings. Having the chance to get to know others while participating in a shared activity or recurring group can help provide the clear expectations autistic people need to feel more at ease connecting with others.

Try taking it further:

- Make sure information on groups and activities is available in multiple places—in the bulletin, on your website, and from your church office (including details on when, where, and who to contact with questions). Don't assume people know what's happening or how things work just because they've been around for a while.

When you rely on word-of-mouth communication, people on the margins are more likely to be excluded.

- Consider writing down some of the unspoken rules, customs, and traditions of your church. How do you request pastoral care? How do you start a new Bible study, become an elder, or volunteer to read scripture? Are there things that aren't open to lay volunteers? Are there expectations about what counts as participating in the life of the church? These things aren't always obvious to autistic people, and some autists are reluctant to ask questions like this because we're used to people responding defensively.

**You're friendly to lots of different kinds of needs.** It really is incredible the extent to which so many congregations have made accessibility a priority, especially given their limited means. It's common to encounter churches equipped with wheelchair ramps, automatic doors, elevators, accessible parking and bathrooms, hearing amplification devices for worship, private nursing rooms offering muted light and sound, and activity bags for kids. Many of these accommodations have benefits beyond their intended purposes, a broader phenomenon known as the curb-cut effect: when something is designed to benefit a disadvantaged group (for example, folks in wheelchairs), it ends up benefiting everyone (parents with strollers, workers with carts, others with mobility challenges). When churches already have a culture of accommodation, we can see it's important to them that everyone can participate in worship regardless of disability or difference.

Try taking it further:

- Congregations may need help understanding that accommodating autistic people means supporting us to participate in ways that non-autists might find distracting, confusing, or even irreverent. Autistic people can be hypersensitive to sensory input and overstimulated by light, textures, sounds, and smells. Turn off fluorescent lights when possible. In addition to offering noise amplification devices, offer earplugs. Switch to unscented soaps and cleaning products. Small changes like these can minimize sensory overload and make the potential to be overwhelmed easier for us to manage.
- Autists can be very literal in how we interpret rules and instructions because social norms aren't intuitive for us. So if you want autists to feel welcome to fidget,

stretch, doodle, and leave as needed during worship, tell us so. A note in the bulletin plus an announcement before worship are good ways to communicate this information in ways that normalize it and support the congregation in becoming more welcoming of difference.

**You've taken the pandemic seriously.** When churches helped flatten the curve, supplied masks, and organized grocery deliveries in 2020, they demonstrated they could practice what they preach in terms of caring for the sick and disabled. Autistic people are paying attention to how disabled folks have been treated during the pandemic, and it matters to us that you continue to prioritize the safety of the most vulnerable.

Try taking it further:

- Continue to normalize masking in your community. Some autistic people like to wear masks because covering our face helps us to feel more at ease: when we are wearing an actual mask, we may rely less on those self-protective behaviors we learned to mask our autistic traits.
- Seek wisdom from disabled leaders and communities about how to support one another in crisis—and how to know for sure the crisis has passed.

**You're online now.** Because you've taken the pandemic seriously, you scrambled with everyone else to reimagine what it meant to be the church when we could no longer gather in person. Whether you decided to worship virtually via video call or you started livestreaming your sanctuary worship, you've likely already figured out sustainable ways to be accessible to homebound people. Autistic people can feel a genuine sense of belonging in online communities and experience meaningful connection through written communication, so the idea that face-to-face connection is inherently better doesn't resonate with a lot of us. When churches continue to prioritize ways of connecting virtually once in-person activities have resumed, they demonstrate that they value their online participants regardless of their capacity to participate face-to-face.

Try taking it further:

- Find ways to follow up with online worship participants. Give congregants the option of being reached out to in writing rather than by phone or face-to-face.
- Learn more about neurodivergence and ableism as a congregation, and name it on your website as something that your church cares about.

**You're committed to inclusion.** It's a common misconception that autists' difficulty interpreting and mirroring facial expressions or social cues means that we lack empathy. Autists are often extremely sensitive to other people's suffering, and we're paying attention to how you treat other traditionally marginalized people. Add the fact that we tend to have strong opinions about justice and fairness, and autists will have a hard time understanding how any congregation is *not* committed to inclusion in the Year of Our Lord 2023.

Try taking it further:

- Consider the ways that people with multiple marginalized identities might experience your church. Ask them!
- Learn why autistic children are more vulnerable to abuse, why autistic women are at greater risk of suicide, and why autistic people of color are more likely to be harmed or killed.
- Support organizations that help autistic people, like the Autism Self Advocacy Network, instead of organizations attempting to eradicate autism—a goal many autists don't support.

Every autistic person is different, but each of us engages with the world a little differently than the average person does. As for me, I'm often way more confused than the average person, but sometimes being autistic means I have access to special insight others don't have. When congregations become places where autistic people feel like we can present our authentic selves, in the pews and in leadership positions, the church can be a wonderful place to be autistic, and autistic people can be a blessing to the communities they belong to.

I know the work of making our communities more inclusive and accessible can feel daunting, but we've been given the paradox of the gospel as our hope and guide: God can do a lot with a little. We all benefit from clear communication of expectations like when to stand, sit, and keep silent or when and where the church picnic is held. Call it the parable of the mustard seed or the curb-cut effect, but when we make small changes to make life easier for disadvantaged groups, we draw the kin-dom of God closer for everyone.